

Archaeology of Death and Burial



HPHP4002

Death & the Archaeologist?

- What do we examine & why?
- Skeleton:
 - Completeness & disposition in grave/tomb, etc.
 - Anthropological studies
- Information surrounding funerary ritual:
 - Burial facility
 - Grave goods
 - Relationships between burials



Excavating St James Gardens

Rites of Passage

- Van Gennep 1909 (1960)
- Examined rituals performed to move individuals between social states:
 - Key stages in life cycle
 - Liminality
 - Passing over threshold
- Participants move through three stages:
 - Separation
 - Marginalisation
 - Incorporation



Late Geometric vase:
scene of *prothesis*

Rites of Passage

- Funerary ritual: key stage is marginalisation
 - Liminal state
 - Mourners polluted through association with death
- Ritual allows participants to move between states:
 - Deceased to afterlife, realm of ancestors etc.
 - Living re-incorporated within society ... Adopting new social roles



Late Geometric vase:
scene of *ekphora*

The Ancestors

- Funerary ritual & burial grounds are used to legitimise (territorial) rights
 - Burial ground = burial place for a group's ancestors
 - Ethnographic analogy – especially the **Merina of Madagascar**
- Kinship-based agricultural groups maintain links with the ancestors to bolster their territorial claims



Ancestor ceremony, Madagascar

Processual Archaeology

- Focused on **social organisation**
 - Burials: important source of information on past social structures
- Aimed to identify **cross-cultural laws** about human behaviour



Ippeios, Lesbos: wealthy female burial

Binford (1971)

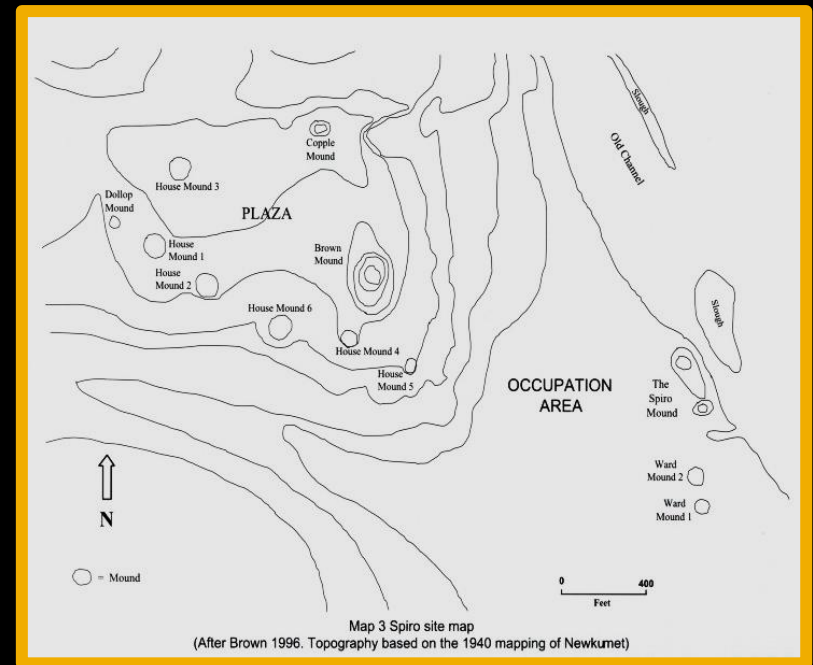
- "...the **heterogeneity** in mortuary practices which is characteristic of a single sociocultural unit would vary directly with the **complexity** of the **status hierarchy**" (1971: 14)
- Can infer status mortuary practices
- **Social persona** is symbolised in mortuary record:
 - "composite of the social identities maintained in life" (1971: 17)



Treasury of Atreus

Goldstein (1981)

- Spatial variability in mortuary ritual
- Corporate group rights over restricted resources is legitimated by lineal descent (ancestors)
- This is reaffirmed through ritual
 - Maintenance of a permanent bounded area for the exclusive disposal of their dead



Spiro mound group, Mississippi

Brown (1981)

- How to identify rank in prehistoric burials
- The overall magnitude of bereavement varies in direct proportion to social scale:
 - Greater your social importance the more people will be affected
- Greater expenditure in funerary ritual:
 - Tombs, grave goods, number of mourners etc.



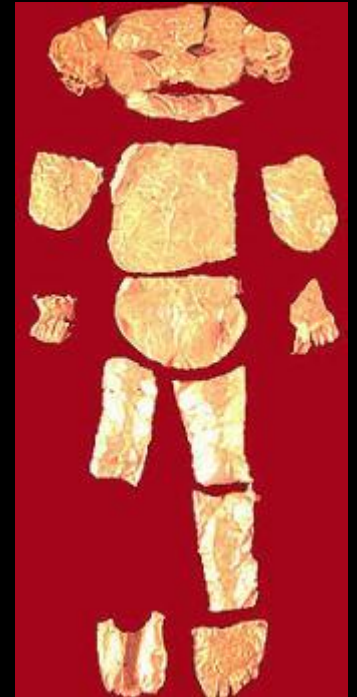
Pyramids at Giza

Brown (1981)

- Power is symbolised through **exclusive access** to specific burial locations
- **Hereditary rank/status:** children singled out for elaborate funerary treatment
- Increasing authority:
 - Greater expenditure of wealth in burials
 - Symbols of authority



Shaft Graves,
Mycenae



Parker Pearson (1982)

- Variation in mortuary ritual reflects **social practices** rather than social roles
- **Ideology** legitimises power structures:
 - A means of explaining the social & natural world
- Mortuary ritual = ritual/ideological communication:
 - Manipulation of material culture



Highgate Cemetery

Death & Identity

- Ritual used to negotiate & reaffirm identities
- The living bury the dead:
 - “Even as the survivors honor & celebrate the deceased, they may also embroider or deny certain dimensions of the dead person’s past identity, since the honors accorded to the dead will inevitably reflect upon the status of the funeral’s sponsors” (Keswani 2005: 341)
- The “identity” of the deceased is an idealised creation: politics of the **survivor**



Reconstruction of Kalavassos Tomb 11

Commemoration & Memory

- Funerary monuments & ritual play are important in social relations:
 - Creation of social memory
- The creation/destruction of artefacts & monuments can create/destroy memory
- Ongoing manipulation of bones/bodies as part of funerary ritual



Mémorial de Thiepval

Tarlow (1999)

- “Death is necessarily an **emotional experience**, but the nature of the emotions... & response to those emotions are culturally constructed” (1999: 183)
 - Importance of emotional experience in structuring social relations
 - How **material culture** represents & constructs emotional experiences



Summary

- Various approaches to the “Archaeology of Death”, reflecting changing interpretative frameworks in archaeology
- Cultural History: tried to identify **cultural norms** (not concerned with ancient social structures)
- Processual Archaeology: emphasis was general laws & identifying ranking
- Postprocessual Archaeology: varied approaches concerned with:
 - Ideology, memory, emotion, identity & the society burying the dead rather than the deceased individual